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# Watching Handball Transmissions

## *Experiences of Autonomy, Competency and Relatedness*

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### Abstract

The current article presents a qualitative study of Danish television viewer's reception of Danish handball transmissions. The overall aim of the study has been to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of televised sport as a specific kind of television entertainment. The analysis shows that, due to the dramaturgic structure of handball transmissions, viewers consider such transmissions particularly reliable and effective sources of entertainment. The transmissions' entertainment value derives from their specific ability to give the viewers a complex experience of feeling autonomous and competent when mastering the game and in relation to others. The study shows that entertainment concerns both affective involvement and identity formation, as social and cultural meaning seem to be at the root of involvement. Even though both men and women find great joy in the transmissions, their viewing is embedded in quite diverse patterns regarding additional media use. This points to gendered differences regarding how the entertaining experience is basically received and the qualities sought and pursued in the transmissions.

**Keywords:** reception, entertainment, television, sports, handball, transmissions

### Introduction

In the industry, sports transmissions are well known for their ability to split the audience in two halves, one of which is totally indifferent and the other highly committed. The present article focuses on the specific kind of engagement exhibited by the latter and analyses it by means of a qualitative study. Contrary to former contributions in this field, the focus is not on sports in general or on large international events or football, but on Danish viewers' reception of handball transmissions from the national leagues. Furthermore, this is a qualitative audience study in a field dominated by a quantitative paradigm, the present aim being to gain a more nuanced understanding of televised sports as a specific kind of television entertainment. Handball is a marginal phenomenon on the international scene, but it is a very popular sport on television in Denmark, surpassed only by football. It attracts a television audience remarkably different from most other sports audiences in terms of age and gender, and hence handball transmissions have an interesting potential to broaden our understanding of the audience's fascination with televised sports. The study takes its starting point in a theoretical understanding of entertainment as a complex matter, arguing that there is a relationship between the individual and the social in the reception process. This particularly applies to sports programmes,

which due to their highly open structure have a very active audience. The analysis is underpinned by concepts from media-entertainment research stressing that entertainment is a cognitive-affective experience of an individual who is highly motivated by an underlying need to experience autonomy, competency and relatedness (Vorderer et al. 2006). The study provides a more nuanced understanding of *how* this is manifested in typical viewers' own narratives about their reception, and how satisfying these three needs is interrelated and not just a matter of viewer motivation. The aesthetic characteristics of the text seem to play an active role in entertainment as well.

## **Towards a More Complex Understanding of the Entertainment Experience**

Audiences of televised entertainment have been approached using quite diverse scholarly paradigms, emphasizing either individual, affective or social, societal aspects of the viewing experience. Since the 1980s, contributions from the psychologically oriented effect and uses & gratifications paradigm have shown a continual interest in the different kinds of motivations, experiential states, emotional involvement and gratifications obtained by individual users of different television genres, including drama, sports and comedy. Over the past decade, media psychologists have had a growing interest in summarizing and integrating insights from empirical findings, psychological theory, philosophy and aesthetics in order to develop more comprehensive understandings of the entertainment experience (Zillmann & Vorderer 2000, Bryant & Vorderer 2006). As already mentioned, media sports has been explored in this paradigm as well. Different experimental studies testing theoretical hypotheses have documented in quantitative terms how varying dispositional and situational factors influence enjoyment (See Wenner & Gantz 1989, 1998 and Raney 2004 for overviews). The focus has largely been on the situational context and individual responses, and thus these contributions have tended to tone down the importance of the texts in the reception process. One recurrent theme has been the viewer's experience of violence in sports programming (Bryant 1989, Bryant et al. 1998, Bruns 2004), and Comisky et al. (1977) explored the role of a dramatic commentary style in the reception of sports programmes. Their study presented very interesting evidence of how television's representation actually influences the viewer's experience and hence supports an approach that includes the aesthetics of the texts.

Television entertainment has also been at the core of analysis in the cultural studies tradition, which has had a much stronger focus on the media's representations, as the audience was "best understood as a product of discursive formations" (Whannel 1998: 226). Contributions from this approach have been based on qualitative methods such as textual analysis and/or ethnographic observation or interviews, and have been motivated by a wish to understand how popular programmes are used as everyday resources for identity formation and have relevance for politics, as they help viewers behave as citizens (Van Zoonen 2005: 124). In other words, the contributions have had a stronger focus on the social and societal aspects of reception. Early on, Richard Dyer (1992) pointed out a relationship between the individual and the social, stating that entertainment forms come to have emotional significance 'by acquiring their signification in relation to the complex of meanings in the social-cultural situation in which they are

produced' (Dyer 1992: 21). During the past decade, he has been followed by other scholars, who have explicated the arguments supporting a more complex understanding, when conceptualizing the audiences and their engagement with entertaining media texts (Hills 2002, Gray 2008).

Whannel (1998) points to the fact that, thus far, no empirical work on sports audiences has been done from a cultural studies perspective, and that cultural studies' tendency to focus solely on meaning and the cognitive dimensions of reception could be problematic when dealing with reception of sports programmes. He states that the texts of sports are more open-ended than for instance news or current affairs, and that the audience is a more active and emotionally involved one (Whannel 1998: 226). Stiehler (2003) and Frandsen (2008) have pointed in the same direction, explaining the textual 'openness' from a game perspective. Following this, it seems plausible to apply more multi-faceted understandings of the enjoyment of sports programmes by encompassing both feelings and production of meaning.

Within certain parts of media psychology, there currently seems to be an interesting initial move away from a purely individualized perspective when dealing with entertainment. Vorderer et al. (2006) argue that the audience's engagement with media entertainment should be taken seriously, as it seems to fulfil basic psychological needs of the audience that actually encompass the social as part of the individual's psychological needs. Working from similar psychological perspectives, Jantzen & Vetner (2007) point in the same direction. They state that emotions are situational evaluations that originate from the individual's relations to the outside world. Thus, according to their perspective, the individual is by no means a totally autonomous experiencing subject, but should be considered an individual that interacts with an experiential phenomenon – in our case, a televised sports event – which is shared by others (Jantzen and Vetner 2007: 39). In other words, the immediate individual emotional reactions experienced while watching a sports event cannot be comprehended as a completely isolated mental activity on the part of the viewer, even if he or she is watching alone.

Vorderer et al. (2006) suggest that people seeking entertainment are motivated by a desire to satisfy fundamental human needs for experiencing competency, autonomy and relatedness. These needs are universal, and their satisfaction is of great importance to a person's mental well-being. Experiencing competency is a feeling of mastering something without being severely challenged. They stress that empirical research shows that social-contextual factors play a role in this process, as feedback from others may enhance the motivation to seek this kind of experience. In literature about fan culture, we find support for this idea, as mastery of the cultural forms of a specific sub-cultural area is considered a basic pleasurable knowledge component of becoming and enjoying being a fan (Jenkins 1992). Vorderer et al. note the fact that television viewing is considered 'easy' compared to other media, meaning that television as such is a very prominent provider of this kind of experience to the audience.

According to Vorderer et al., the experience of autonomy is achieved when engaging in activities that are not forced upon you by others. On an unconscious level, one may be influenced by others when choosing to watch a particular sports event on television. But on the individual conscious level, the choice is purely voluntary, and in order to satisfy the need for autonomy, it is important for people to perceive their behaviour as self-determined and independent.

Experiencing relatedness is basically a feeling of being in touch with somebody, and it is rooted in the childhood need for a secure relational base from which to explore the world. Again, Vorderer et al. cite literature concerning television, and especially Horton and Wohl's theory of television as a provider of parasocial interactions and relations between the individual viewer and media personae hold their attention.

One of the vague points in the psychological approach to media entertainment is the lack of attention to the media texts providing the stimuli requested by the individual. As noted above, Vorderer et al. are aware that the medium – in most cases they mention television or computers – may be especially well-suited to meeting the needs of viewers. Nevertheless, they remain extremely vague concerning the role of the text, and tend to downplay its significance. Their main purpose is to 'describe entertainment as an intrinsically motivated response to certain media products' (Vorderer et al. 2006: 6). But whether these needs could be satisfied by any media product, or whether the actual structure or content of these media products has any effect on this response, remains unclear.

## **Handball: A Popular Sport on Danish Television**

The background for handball's status as one of the most popular sports on Danish television is the significant international success of the women's national team between 1993-2003. This was immediately taken advantage of by the two national public service broadcasters, DR and TV 2, who bought the rights and started covering the sport on a regular basis.

In the period between 1993-2005, handball accounted for 14% of the hours of sports broadcasting<sup>1</sup> on Danish television – surpassed only by football, with 28%. In terms of audiences, handball holds an even stronger position, as during this same period it accounted for 26% of the hours spent on sports consumption, whereas football accounted for 38%.<sup>2</sup>

Compared to other sports transmissions on Danish television, the audience for handball transmissions exhibits some remarkable characteristics:

The average size of the audience for transmissions of the Danish handball league matches for men and women is larger than for transmissions of the men's national Danish football league.

Gender: The audience for transmissions of both women's and men's handball is characterized by an almost equal distribution between the sexes.

Age: The audience for handball is relatively old, as viewers over the age of 51 constitute almost 60% of the audience.

The specific demographic profile of the audience is linked to peculiarities of the viewing situations framing the experience. For both handball and football, a large proportion of the viewers watch the transmissions alone (66% for football<sup>3</sup>, 64% for handball<sup>4</sup>). The figures on handball match transmissions show an interesting difference concerning men's and women's games, as 70% of the audience for men's games watch alone, and only 57% of the audience for women's games do so.

These figures give rise to a number of more qualitative questions concerning the importance of the specific game, and the ages and genders of those watching televised sports.

The structural differences between sports may give rise to very different kinds of behaviours and receptions, as the dynamics of the games are quite diverse. Broadcasting sports involves interpretations that may support viewers in their efforts to be entertained, for instance by feeling competent, or to relate to others. In what ways does the medium support this in the case of handball, and how does the audience perceive the role of the media? Does the structure of the specific game facilitate certain experiences or readings?

The proportion of female viewers is rather high and, together with the age profile, it gives us cause to ask whether these transmissions hold particular qualities as entertainment products?

## **The Handball Case – About the Method**

The following is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with 19 viewer respondents (10 women and nine men) conducted in the viewers' homes by the present author or a research assistant. The participants selected for the interviews are regular, but passionate viewers with a broad range of knowledge and experience with the sport, including both a few former elite players, several who have played and/or been coaches on a lower level, and several who have a more distant relation to the sport and have never been active themselves. The sample reflects the demographic profile of the audience for handball transmissions in general, with respect to age, gender, and education. The intention has not been to meet quantitative scientific standards of representativity, but to ensure a rich and varied body of data on the typical viewing. In order to obtain more knowledge about the situational context of the reception, it was decided to combine individual interviews with group interviews. If the respondents normally viewed the programmes with a partner, both of them participated in the interview on an equal basis. The interaction between the persons during the interview provided further insights into their behaviour during the programmes, insights concerning gendered receptions and the enjoyment related to sharing the experience. Five out of 14 interviews were held with couples.

## **Creating Spaces of Autonomy**

Since 2001, Danish Handball League matches have been regularly broadcast live, late on Wednesday nights and during weekend afternoons. For most of the respondents, handball match transmissions seem to be a very integrated part of the 'dailyness' of their weekend schedules. The transmissions are considered one of many potential activities in this schedule – they do not have top priority, but are nevertheless often chosen. Some of the respondents plan their viewing in order to ensure the right circumstances, while others seem to rely on an unconscious 'inner schedule', established by television over time. Planning is done in particular by those who watch on their own, despite the presence of other family members. Or the viewing may be planned on the basis of a strong interest in certain matches that are expected to be particularly exciting. The programmes are regarded as a rather reliable source for respondents wishing to achieve what they call a 'relaxing experience' or a 'cosy atmosphere'. The act of choosing to watch a transmission in itself is a significant marker:

After finishing shopping, or after having been out in the evening, having had guests, or after cleaning the house – then, in the late afternoon, we cannot be bothered anymore. Then we get the idea to switch on the television: Oh, that's nice, handball. Then one can just hit the couch. (F 46)

The respondents clearly experience the transmissions as an alternative to the activities and social responsibilities of everyday life. The respondents demonstrate autonomy by choosing to pursue very personal interests. Across quite diverse life situations, the transmissions thus seem to be used as vehicles for creating a particular space of autonomy.

Whatever their circumstances, most of the viewers consciously create, mark, and ensure the viewing situation as a specific mental space; a space in which they get in touch with emotional experiences of being competent and related to others. When viewers have high expectations of a certain match, they are particularly aware of creating this specific situation:

I'm a creature of habit. I prefer a cup of tea, and then I'm either just watching and doing nothing else – or I'm rolling cigarettes – I'm a smoker. No matter what, I have the same kind of experience. But I'm not able to do anything else but this. You mustn't ask me why. (F 33)

To ensure the appropriate experience of the game, sitting in certain chairs or rooms is considered important, phone calls are sometimes ignored, and viewing is often accompanied by the consumption of tea, coffee, and cake. Regardless of the action in question, they are all low-key ritual markers of a certain space in which the respondents access specific experiences of the game. Sharing the experience is important to them all, and the programmes are thus vehicles for experiencing relatedness in a broader sense. Some of them often enjoy watching together with a spouse, a friend, or other family members. Sharing the same kind of interest in the game, or at least respecting it, is then a prerequisite:

I have a particular agreement with Anette, saying that if we watch handball it's okay to chat, but I'm not obliged to look at her when I'm answering her. I'm allowed to keep up with the game. (F 74)

That's the difference between me and my wife. She hasn't played handball, and if one has played it for a time one can identify much better with the actions on the field (...) So there we part. I'll go and watch in a separate room, and she stays in the living room. (M 46)

Several of the respondents use the programmes as a social resource, helping them to keep in touch with friends or family members; others prefer to watch the live broadcasts alone, and later share the experience with friends or peers who they know have exactly the same kind of interest in the game. It is important for all of them to share the experience with like-minded partners who can recognize their mastery of the game, and thereby reinforce the experience of being competent.

The viewers build up this space, because it allows them to not only feel, but also to perform autonomy and competency. Most of the respondents express a great deal of pleasure in shouting and discussing the actions, regardless of whether they are watching on their own or with someone. They are very aware that this behaviour differs from that of other viewing situations. Performance of competency seems key to understanding some of the basic attractions of viewing sports:

Yes, then we're talking about him being a fool. Of course, there's also a lot of commenting on the referees when one is watching. If they perform well. One doesn't often find them to be extremely clever. One mostly comments on the poor aspects of their performance – and on players performing extremely well. (F 28)

I engage myself in the game. Standing up when there is a fast counter (...) I'm convinced that I have good insights about when a player needs to be replaced. And I also have a good understanding of the referee's decisions. (...) I may be asked a question: Why do they do this? And then I explain – both to the television and the others (M 35)

Not every match is able to engage the viewers like this, but it is this kind of strong engagement that is expected from the genre. The immediate, bodily engagement is both an affective reaction to actions in the game, and at the same time, it seems to be a conscious, performative strategy for reinforcing the same individual affective involvement. It also creates relatedness among those watching together, as expressing one's emotional involvement creates opportunities for both sharing the experience and confirming a relationship based on a shared recognition of the actions on the screen. This does not require total consensus on the interpretation, as a certain amount of disagreement fuels this self-conscious behaviour, which indicates that this space allows the viewer to undertake a very active anti-authoritarian role.

To sum up, both the set-up of the viewing situation and the behaviour when watching Danish handball on television are closely related to family life and everyday culture. This has to do with the age of the audience, and as a minor international sport, handball has not been the focal point of a dedicated fan culture, as we know it from football or American football. It seems to have been influenced by a stronger representation of women, children, and people who have reached mid-life. Furthermore, the viewers have a strong experience of proximity to the sport and the top players, which may eliminate a need for more excessive ritualistic behaviour. Several of the viewers interviewed attend live games as spectators, several have participated in the game themselves, some have been coaches or referees, and some are acquainted with somebody who has been or still is active in the sport – two of them are even somewhat acquainted with players on the teams shown on television. Thus, several of them have a well-established platform for engaging in the game and feeling competent.

## **Flexible and Reliable Frameworks for Satisfying Oneself**

Compared to other types of sports on television or other entertaining genres, the respondents regard handball match transmissions as particularly well-suited to satisfying their needs within the structural framework of their lives. Key to many of them is the fact that sports matches are real:

This is real life. I think sports is good entertainment. And it's with real people participating and doing their best every day in order to entertain – among other things. So, I find it unique. (M 62)

Sports distinguishes itself by its particular relationship to reality – it is part of reality, and at the same time, a world of its own, due to the game structure. This makes sports



different from many other televised phenomena and creates opportunities for value-oriented readings and the creation of parallels to reality in the reception.

The structure of the sport and its televised coverage are prominent parts of the explanation for the popularity of the transmissions as everyday entertainment. A handball match is composed of two halves, each lasting 30 minutes, and the respondents note that this fact makes a handball match transmission rather manageable to integrate into a packed schedule. A handball match transmission is considered a convenient kind of narrative, often offering intense entertainment in a foreseeable time slot in their weekend schedule. Furthermore, the narrative structure of a game is so repetitive that when watching less close games, it is possible to leave for short periods to take care of various family duties. One does not risk missing the one and only winning goal, as in football.

They all perceive the game to be much more dynamic and intense than football, and this is one of the main reasons why they watch the transmissions. The game is played indoors, with seven persons on each team, and frequently takes place in rather small sports halls, with the spectators very close to the field and the players. This creates a rather intense atmosphere and an intimate and clear setting, well-suited to television. One of the respondents explicitly notes how the structure of the game and the broadcasting provide a feeling of intensity and atmosphere in her own living room:

In a handball match one gets the whole picture. You get the whole field at once  
(...) It helps provide a brisk atmosphere, intimacy – one feels a part of it. (F 56)

This respondent feels related to the event and its participants, owing to television's presentation of the game. She and several others even note the fact that a handball match transmission is such an intense experience that they prefer not to watch it in a larger group – in contrast to football.

Many goals are scored during the game, but the uncertainty is still perceived as rather high, as tactical changes may have a great impact on the scores. In close games, this demands a lot of attention on the part of the viewer, who may be disturbed by others. Furthermore, this characteristic may partially explain why many of the respondents focus rather strongly on the role of the coach:

I think it's interesting to observe how they act and use the energy at their disposal. They can do whatever they want, as they are in power. And then one can agree or disagree. (...) I don't think it's great if they film the coach all the time, but bits of sound from him from time to time, and those comments. I think it brings in something extra if you get that, and if you can hear them during time-out. (F 32)

This focus on the coach is another manifestation of viewers' feeling of being competent and regarding themselves as experts on a par with everybody else. But as the quotation above indicates, it is also a result of television's broadcasting of the game, which includes an audiovisual focus on the coach and the tactical aspects of the game.

Concerning the commentators and experts commenting on the game, the respondents are quite reluctant to acknowledge their contribution. Yet there is no reason to suppose that they are of no significance. Several of the respondents explicitly reject the importance of commentators, saying that they are irrelevant, or that television's tendency to integrate more and more experts into the programmes is confusing and irritating. Others adopt a more receptive attitude, and find their contributions interesting. This



sort of downplaying of the role of commentators and experts is another manifestation of autonomy and competency. The viewers basically have an egalitarian approach to the programmes, and use them as a source for experiencing themselves as competent experts. This means that the commentator and the expert become more of a social partner or a mental wall that the viewers use in a cognitive process of trying to come to terms with their own judgements and evaluations of the actions on the screen. The medium thus contributes substantially to viewers' entertainment by providing parasocial relations and interpretative outlines, but the authority in determining the meaning and significance of the actions in the game is still with the viewer, and his and her social network. In that sense, the parasocial relationship is qualitatively different from the relationship that viewers may establish with a 'star' host on a quiz or news programme, for instance.

### **Affective Involvement and Identity**

For both those watching alone and those watching together with family members, the viewing of handball match transmissions reveals a specific relationship between affective involvement and identity. For some, viewing takes the form of a sort of subcultural sanctuary, to which the individual retreats and pursues an interest that is considered inappropriate in present family life.

For several, it seems to bring viewers in contact with earlier stages of life, when they or their children participated in the sport themselves, or when they were more active as spectators.

I played a lot of badminton and handball as a child. And then I became a teenager, got my periods and glasses. A lot of things were much more fun. And I never had a come-back, which I have been annoyed about since then. (...) I was rather good. (...) I compare with my own matches (when watching). (F 32)

When watching, the respondent connects to earlier stages of life, when the sport constituted an important part of his or her individual and social life, and came to form part of his or her identity. Thus, there is an element of nostalgia in this kind of entertainment, as the programmes are seen as an opportunity to come in emotional contact with parts of the viewer's self that can be maintained and confirmed through engagement with the programmes:

Somehow one gets involved in it. But that's also because we're taking a referee's perspective, a player's perspective, and I'm also taking a coach's perspective. (M 50, former player, coach, and referee)

For most of the respondents, their experiences and competency are later confirmed through communicative exchanges and bonding with others:

We need a free space, and for that sports is fantastic. And it's the matches that we've seen on television – both handball and football. Those are the issues we discuss. (...) we're a big group of men who have been active ourselves. And this gives another kind of mutual understanding. And, yes, we're extremely bright! And they (the female colleagues) do not interfere. This is our culture – our chat. (M 62)

The emotional engagement may also link to other parts of a respondent's identity. Many situations in the games are understood as metaphoric representations of situations well known from the respondents' former or present everyday lives, and the whole process of localizing, analysing, and passing moral judgements on these situations in the game involves important elements of mastering the game. For instance, a retired bank executive extensively judges and evaluates the accomplishments of the individual players or the coaches, and a social educator focuses heavily on the coach's ability to balance the interests and talents of the individuals in the group. Several of the respondents explicitly stress that these kinds of readings – the mastery of the game – are highly relevant to them, as they can be transferred directly to situations that they are expected to handle in their working life, or life in general:

(About fairness) I think it's important, because that's part of a game, and part of a whole life. You know, it's not just in a handball match, you should keep that in the back of your mind throughout life. (F 55)

On a more general level, identity in terms of geography and gender clearly influences the respondents' affective engagement in the programmes. Although Denmark is a small country, local and regional identities constitute a surprisingly central parameter in most of the respondents' affective involvement in the programmes. Generally, rooting and cheering is toned down, but identification with someone in the game is still key to involvement. For some viewers, the nature of this relationship seems to be established on a very intuitive basis; for others, who don't have a strong affiliation with a specific team, the relationship takes the form of a choice guided by more implicit moral orientations:

Mostly, I support one of the teams – but not a specific team. It depends on who is playing. Sometimes I think: This team deserves to win now, as they didn't do very well last season, and they're next to get off to a good start. (F 33)

The importance of becoming engaged in the game via identification is indirectly evident in the interviews. Since the early nineties, one of the intentions behind the broadcasters' improvement of the transmissions as a genre has been to bring the viewer closer to the tactical aspects of the game by using microphones, among other things, which allow the viewer to overhear the discussions between the players and coaches during time-outs. Besides offering viewers an opportunity to gain more insight into the tactical aspects of the game, this also gives them intimate access to the players and coach.

All respondents in the study spontaneously voiced frustration over the ever-increasing number of non-Danish players who have been employed in the women's league since the mid-nineties. Problems of identification, and concerns about Danish players' opportunities to make use of their talent, fuel this frustration, and the medium unintentionally supports it. By giving the viewers access to the foreign players' comments, the microphone seems to convey differences. This obstructs both understanding and emotional engagement in what the respondents consider decisive moments.

## **A Gendered Territory**

On a very general level, gender seems to frame the entire experience, simply because handball is a sport. Despite the fact that almost half of the audience are women, most

of those interviewed voiced a conception of sports viewing as male territory. Several of them said that they were not 'real experts' or that they did not know very much about it. Others supported their male partner during the interview and indicated that he was the knowledgeable expert:

I don't think that I understood men's games before. Compared to women's games, I considered them a bit irritating to watch. But I've got another understanding, via Anders. Anders is good at explaining what happens, and maybe I ask a lot of stupid questions. (F 25)

(...) he's the cleverest in this field, one could say. And if I'm shouting and scolding, he's sitting there calmly, thinking for himself. Because, he knows better. (F 55)

Only women who have a very strong identity, rooted in the sport by way of extensive participation, seem to resist this hegemonic framework. Men's approach to sport is considered the 'true way' to be a sports viewer, regardless of the fact that many of the women directly or indirectly demonstrate both extensive engagement with and knowledge of the game and the players.

The respondents' additional media use reveals some gendered differences that indicate quite diverse ways of contextualizing the experience of the television programmes. Many of the male viewers routinely read the sport pages in one or two daily newspapers, several of them check results and news on teletext once or twice daily, and a few check the sports news on the Internet from time to time. They express a great joy in building up and maintaining factual knowledge about the sport. This basically concerns competency, and the knowledge constitutes subcultural capital, both feeding the affective engagement in front of the screen, and serving as a social resource when bonding with colleagues and friends. Despite men's clear affective involvement when exciting games are broadcast, surveying and tactical understanding seem desirable key qualities in the male approach to the programmes. When they show an interest in individuals, this seems restricted to those aspects of their personality that link directly to their achievements in the game.

The female approach is not as easy to pin down as one unambiguous orientation. Several of the female viewers express the same kind of affective involvement and analytical, tactical interests as the male viewers do. But only in a few cases is this approach supported by their additional media use – and then, not in the same systematic, factually oriented way. One group of female respondents seems to find great joy in building up complementary kinds of knowledge. This is knowledge gathered from weekly magazines and other kinds of entertainment programmes, where the players and coaches are presented as celebrities. As such, the focus is on the athlete's personality as a whole, and these respondents articulate a clear empathetic and emotional interest in exploring the players' personalities through the different social roles represented and performed in these other media genres:

I think it's exciting to know what sort of job they have, how many children they have, who their boyfriend or girlfriend is, and where they live. It may be a kind of female curiosity. (F 44)

This kind of general interest in the players may support identification – a feeling which is of great importance.

For some of the respondents, identification follows the viewers' own sex, and the gendered connection is then established through fascination with individual players' distinctive performance and handling of psychological pressure. All the respondents perceive women's and men's games as quite different. In general, women's games are associated with elegance and charm, and a high degree of tactical orientation. The pace of the game is fast, but still allows the viewer to foresee part of it, and together with a moderate degree of bodily power, the women's games create a desirable degree of transparency in the systematic aspects of the game. One respondent even explicitly notes the pace as a positive quality, facilitating the tactical and technical readings of the game, which she seeks in order to feel competent. The men's games are associated with a more introverted and less smiling attitude, which, combined with a faster tempo and higher degree of bodily confrontation, cause some of the men to prefer the women's games. In contrast, two female viewers, who earlier preferred the women's games, now prefer to watch men's games – partly influenced by their male partners' interests. However, the gendered orientation still exists among a group of male viewers who have been very active as players or coaches themselves and express a clear-cut preference for transmissions of the men's league matches. For many of the other respondents, the preferences are not as clear-cut, but seem to be partly influenced by the extent of the national teams' success, as this feeds an interest in following the national league players.

### **Value-oriented Readings: Skill, Will, and Social Harmony**

Reception of the transmissions implies judgements and interpretations that show how the sport has meaning for viewers in a broader sense. In this case, the sports-specific game structures and television's way of presenting the game seem to pave the way for moral interpretations, which on a more general level can be seen as thematizations of the relationship between the individual and the group. By making these ethical readings, the respondents confirm their relationships to certain ideological groups in society. They seem to read the game mainly on the basis of already existing ethical beliefs, and thus it can be seen as a confirmation of relatedness on a more abstract level. By watching and interpreting, the viewers participate in a kind of ritualized behaviour, achieving contact with and confirming certain ethical beliefs that they share with others.

One of the repeated themes among the respondents is actualized by the ongoing structural changes in Danish handball, and comes up when the respondents express their preferences for certain teams or players:

I really like the teams from Kolding and Fredericia. Fredericia is fantastic. It's such a group of quite ordinary boys almost accidentally playing handball. There are no stars on the team. Their goalkeeper, Tromle, he's a great, great guy. (F 74)

I'm attracted by a team like Fredericia, because I've also been like them – not that technically good. A team for us, because they are slogging and fighting hard, and they've managed to get their coach fired and get a new one hired. And despite this, they have succeed in making progress. Even though firing a coach seldom results in progress. I really like that. (M 46)

The respondents' preferences are basically evaluations of paths to success, and link directly to their need to identify with someone in a sport that is currently in a state of

dramatic change, and has become commercialized and professionalized. Consequently, the power of money and the implementation of a business-oriented approach to sports also become an issue, as for some of the respondents it represents a threat to the inherent ideology of sports, regarding equal competition. It comes up in their general concern about the presence of many foreign players in the women's national league. But it is also expressed indirectly through a pronounced preference for clubs that have proved successful in identifying and improving young players from their own ranks, instead of 'just' buying new players from other clubs. For others, it comes up when evaluating the performance of individual players:

I think that professional players often ought to perform better than they sometimes do. When they get such good salaries, particularly in football, and handball as well, then I think they have no right to be proud of their efforts. (...) I'm also focused on individual performances in a team. And there may be first class players who always perform well, I really like that. (M 80)

Skill, in terms of finding talent, coaching, and managing, and an individual will to work hard and do one's bit for the team are common and basic values in many of the viewers' interpretative approaches. For the respondents, they constitute praiseworthy ways of achieving success, and they reflect an insistent appreciation of everyday life in the clubs, and a moderating response to ongoing change. Several of the respondents thus contrast this kind of success to a swift rise to fame by means of money or pure business talent.

The structural characteristics of handball as a team sport played on a very limited field underpin two other interlinked, value-oriented readings. These are basically concerned with the relationship between the individual and the collective, and they are activated by inherent structures in the game, which call for individual physical strength, courage, and creativity, on the one hand, and collaboration and tactical appreciation, on the other. Balancing these two seems key, in the viewers' interpretations, and in many ways this reading is accentuated by television's presentation of the game, which, through commentaries, statistics, replays, and visual framing, integrates both aspects.

One of the readings has an individual focus as its underlying basis, as it focuses on the individual player's ability to perform by virtue of a strong physique or an intelligent, tactical mindset:

And then it's exciting to see who is able to play with their muscles and who is able to play with their head. Because it's not always enough using the muscles. (F 55)

This kind of reading seems rooted in an idealistic orientation, balancing the physical and mental aspects of sports on the individual level. Handball's ability to accommodate aggressive behaviour within the rules of the game is undoubtedly regarded as positive by many of the respondents, but it is not uncontrolled aggression that they seek, as the rules, technical mastery, and a tactical mindset are considered important counterbalancing elements.

Another reading involves a more general fascination with the interdependence between the individual and the collective:

I prick up my ear for psychological issues, the tactics and the relations between the players, the team and the coach. (M 35)

I enjoy the periods of stress on a team, how it gets through such a period, how a team handles stress. If a team leads the competition, and suddenly falls behind. How can it change the game. (...) The psychological game going on when one player is at a low level – how the rest can help him to perform. (M 46)

Sports matches are extreme and stressful situations and handball requires collaboration between the individual and the group in order for the team to achieve success. Thus, many of the respondents think that the game has a strong similarity with their everyday lives. Some of the respondents tend to focus on the team, stressing that success is only possible if the team and the coach are able to take advantage of the mental and physical potentials of the individual. Others seem more focused on the distanced and individual role of the coach, and evaluate his ability to take advantage of individual talents for the benefit of the whole team.

## Conclusion

By combining a qualitative methodological approach with a theoretical framework derived from media psychology, the present study has shed light on the complexity of a specific kind of television entertainment, showing how the entertaining experience constitutes an interplay between textual structures and a motivated but also socially and culturally rooted individual. The viewers prefer handball transmissions as providers of entertainment, rather than other activities and sports transmissions, precisely because the specific content and structure of handball transmissions optimize their chances of gratification in the form of experiencing autonomy, competency and relatedness. By applying a qualitative approach, the present study has been able to explore *how* a sports transmission, as a very open text with a basic dramaturgy based on uncertainty, depends to a great extent on an active viewer who is both highly motivated and knowledgeable about the rules. The entertainment value of these transmissions is certainly about experiencing affective arousal within a foreseeable time-slot. But what seems perhaps even more important is that, due to the specific pace and intensity of the game and television's ability to provide both an overview of and insight into the tactical and emotional reactions, the transmissions give viewers an opportunity to be immersed in a game where their mental and cognitive capacity can be activated and challenged. Mastery of the game is pivotal as it is a psychologically stimulating experience, it is often reinforced by feedback from the viewer's social context, and it seems to support identity building processes. This applies in particular to male viewers, as their consumption of handball and sports in other media is systematic, whereas female viewers seem more apt to satisfy their needs through the transmissions and the viewing situation per se.

A prerequisite for mental involvement is identification with and support of one of the teams. The fan culture around handball is rather new and does not entail the same kind of very dedicated strong involvement in one particular club, as we know it from football. Nevertheless, the qualitative data have shown that viewing handball transmissions implies a meaning producing process that involves value-oriented readings and judgements, some of which even oppose current transformations in the sport. The viewers more or less consciously attach socially and culturally constructed meaning to the players, the clubs and the specific game in order to get involved in the specific transmission. Thus, there is more at stake for the handball viewers than an immediate

experience of excitement and feeling competent. Compared to football on television, handball transmissions may seem to be a more self-sufficient kind of entertainment product, as they do not require a fan's very committed attitude or factual expert knowledge to cope with and compensate for less intense periods in the game. But social and cultural meaning seem to be at the root of involvement, contributing significantly to the entertaining experience in this type of entertainment product as well.

## Notes

1. In this case, the figures refer to the number of hours of transmission. The dominance is even stronger when it comes to the coverage of news stories in the daily sports news programmes.
2. The differences between the share of the hours broadcast and the share of consumption are explained mainly by the fact that the Danish football league is covered by a commercial channel with a lower penetration and market share than the two public service channels that have covered Danish handball heavily since 1993.
3. These figures for football are averages from five transmissions in 2006.
4. For handball, the figures are averages from five transmissions of women's games and five transmissions of men's games in 2006.

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